

Corrections official stresses re-entry program

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Commissioner J. David Donahue

Indiana Department of Correction Commissioner J. David Donahue saw firsthand the need for a better transition program for state prisoners soon after he accepted his post in January 2005.

A just-released inmate wound up on a couch in the waiting area of his Indianapolis office. The man told the commissioner he had nowhere else to go.

Donahue, who shared that story at a gathering last year, highlighted his re-entry program as a continued high priority during remarks Friday at City Hall.

The commissioner opened the Indiana Correctional Association's Southeast District Conference that covered everything from job training to community partnerships.

Donahue emphasized examining statistics to measure the department's performance.

"Often, my boss (Gov. Mitch Daniels) says if we're not keeping score, we're just practicing," said Donahue. "He regularly asks me, 'Where are we with regard to outcomes?'"

Officials hope to compile updated data about released prisoners, currently numbering about 60 per day: where they go to work, how they succeed or fail, what struggles they face.

Much of that information has been unavailable. For instance, when Donahue visited Rockville Correctional Facility soon after taking office, he saw a few prisoners learning computer-assisted drafting.

But he quickly discovered no organizers had built any relationships with engineering firms hiring ex-

prisoners. Also, no one knew if others who had been trained ever had gotten jobs as draftsmen.

"So why are we doing it?" asked Donahue. "You're going to have to show me the evidence that supports that that's a great investment. If not, let's teach people how to lay sheet rock."

The commissioner has spoken frequently about cost because until recent correctional staff pay raises were announced, his department operated on a flatline budget since 2005.

To further boost re-entry, Donahue said his staff has strengthened relations with a range of state offices, from the Division of Mental Health and Addiction to Indiana Workforce Development. Those relationships must be solid for re-entry to work well, said the commissioner.

"It's so important we share resources because the prisoners we lock up today often become the clients of that (social service) support system later," he said. "We're trying to make sure this is a seamless exercise."

Bureau of Motor Vehicles even operates mini-offices in three of the state's 32 facilities, according to Donahue.

"That became so vibrantly necessary because we were releasing prisoners without an ID," he said. Plus, job fairs in several facilities better prepare inmates for the outside world.

Ex-Bartholomew County Sheriff Kenny Whipker, the state's new director of parole services, said a parole program's success depends upon a commitment to a smooth re-entry.

"It's definitely high on my priority list," said Whipker at the conference. "We've got to get everybody working together."

He said education is a key before release to get former inmates into many job slots. Parolees whom Whipker supervises generally are a good risk for employers because success on the job is a must to fulfill post-prison requirements.

"We hold their feet to the fire," said Whipker.

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About The Department of Correction

The Department employs over 8,000 employees and houses 24,000 adult and juveniles in 32 facilities, ranging from minimum to maximum custody, prison camps, juvenile facilities and work release centers. The Department's home page on the Internet can be found at: <http://www.in.gov/indcorrection>. The Department's Re-entry Site can be found: <http://www.reentry.in.gov>.